The Hampton Roads metropolitan area often is known as the gateway to southeast Virginia’s beautiful beaches and the Atlantic Ocean. But for residents, Hampton Roads also is home to areas that lack access to healthy food. A coalition called Healthy Food Virginia is working with regional partners on a plan to increase affordable healthy food options, especially in the cities of Hampton, Norfolk, and Portsmouth. Key to the initiative is raising awareness about these areas where access to healthy food is limited, called “food deserts,” and the impact on struggling families and the community’s economy. The work will touch 20,000 residents in low-income and low-access areas.

The Challenge
Virginia is a major grower of food for the United States, yet for many families in the southeastern part of the state, finding accessible, affordable, nutritious food is a challenge. Many residents of Hampton Roads live in areas with low access to healthy food. The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines these areas as “food deserts,” meaning they are urban neighborhoods and rural towns without ready access to fresh, healthy and affordable food. Many residents without a car or other transportation are forced to rely on high-priced and unhealthy food at closer convenience stores. Residents who live in food deserts have much higher rates of obesity, diabetes, and other diet-related health problems. More than 1.7 million Virginia residents, including more than 480,000 children, live in lower-income communities with limited supermarket access.

“Healthy Food Virginia provides synergy to improve healthy food access and work towards preventing diabetes, heart disease, and other chronic diseases.”

- Jessica Mullen, Senior Health Educator, Portsmouth Health Department
The Solution
Healthy Food Virginia is tackling food access as an important first step in battling obesity and the prevention of many chronic diseases. In summer 2015, this coalition met with local food banks; farmers markets; health departments; Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program representatives; health coalitions and many others to gather input and understand work already underway to create a healthier Hampton Roads metropolitan area. To find key allies, the coalition reviewed data and maps to identify areas without grocery stores and with transportation challenges. Low-income census tracts with low access to healthy foods are sprinkled throughout the Hampton Roads region, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Using community assessments, Healthy Food Virginia is drawing in partners to help create a pilot plan for nutritious food access in these areas.

Sustaining Success
Healthy Food Virginia continues to work with community partners to identify convenience stores that already have nutritious options while at the same time improving their total selection of healthy food and beverage offerings. This creates an option for struggling families who live in neighborhoods where no grocery stores currently exist. Healthy Food Virginia also is working to increase the number of farmers markets that accept Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) payments and explore funding options for a matching dollar program to allow SNAP payments to buy more fresh produce.

Policy, System and Environmental Change
Healthy Food Virginia is supporting access to healthy food retail in underserved communities, creating an environmental change aimed at eliminating food deserts and helping Hampton Road residents improve their health through better nutrition.

Results
Healthy Food Virginia has prompted a groundswell of community support to help address the issue of lack of healthy food access. The coalition launched a series of billboards in the fall of 2015 to make an emotional appeal for healthy choices. A social media plan is underway to encourage equity in access to healthy foods. A newspaper ad, similar to the billboards, along with a letter to the editor in the New Journal and Guide will raise awareness about the issue. Planning is underway to engage the community through a grassroots event where medical students will carry a bag of groceries for at least one mile, highlighting the challenges faced by those with food access issues. Upcoming activities will include discussing healthier options with local convenience stores so that the food environment is changed for the better.

Get Involved
Healthy food for all people makes for a healthier community. Connect with your local food banks, farmers markets and health coalitions to see what is being done in your area and how you can contribute. The U.S. Department of Agriculture also has a map tool to view food deserts throughout the country: http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/go-to-the-atlas.aspx